

STAT—

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 1THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
1 April 1980

Survival in China jail: one American's saga

By Takashi Oka

Staff correspondent of The Christian Science Monitor

Peking

Sydney Rittenberg is an American who came through 10 years of solitary confinement in a Chinese prison without a trace of bitterness.

How did he do it? "When you're in an empty place and no end of the tunnel is in sight," he said in a recent interview, "you have to ask yourself, 'What really counts?'"

Mr. Rittenberg is not a religious man in the orthodox sense. "I don't believe in a personal Creator," he says. But he does believe in truth. Jesus' words, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free," came to him with particular force, he recalls, on that bitterly cold night in February 1968 when a carload of armed soldiers took him from his wife and four sleeping children and clanged him into prison.

The so-called Cultural Revolution was at its height. Xenophobia swept the country, and Mr. Rittenberg, who had been in China since 1945, who spoke Chinese, who knew Mao Tse-tung, Chou En-lai, and other top leaders intimately, who had tried to keep alive some tenuous link of understanding between Chinese and Americans during the many years that Sino-American relations were frozen, was told that he had been arrested for being an American spy, an agent of the Central Intelligence Agency.

It could have been a moment of shattering defeat. All he had believed in and worked for seemed to have been negated.

Mr. Rittenberg had to get back to fundamentals. What made life worth living? Wife, children, friends, books, music, food? All these he loved. But what really counted, he decided, was the sense of having made some

contribution, however small, to the long river of human progress, to the cause of human happiness.

The truth that made men free was knowledge — knowledge of what to do "and then you go and do it," Mr. Rittenberg said. Even enclosed within four walls, he could make his contribution. It was the quality of the contribution that counted, not its scale.

He defined freedom to himself as "the ability to develop a rational course of action based on facts and aimed at human happiness," and decided in line with this interpretation that "whether I was free or not depended on me," not on his jailers.

The first great battle he had to fight was loneliness. He reminded himself how solitary he had felt, years ago, in New York, when he had been surrounded by people with whom he had no human contact. Here in prison, the only people he saw were the guards who brought him his food — most of them young peasant boys from north China.

So Mr. Rittenberg talked to his guards. He talked to them about anything and everything. About his boyhood in Charleston, South Carolina. About methods of treating hiccups.

About all sorts of facets of life in the United

telling himself as he went on making a contribution. Some of the guards refused to listen. Others "got hooked and kept coming back for more."

Mr. Rittenberg, who is short and wiry, is an engaging raconteur with an infectious laugh. Ask him to tell you how he managed to make his wife's long Johns — already practically seatless when she hurriedly thrust them on him the night of his arrest — last out 10 years' imprisonment.

It is not difficult to imagine how even guards conditioned to be gruff with the "American imperialist spy" could get hooked on his stories and keep coming back for more. Mr. Rittenberg also decided to keep his cell spotlessly clean. Whatever scraps of rags he had, he used to scrub and scrub until he could literally eat off the floor. When the keepers

came around with their mops, he could truthfully tell them that there was no work for them to do. And, of course, whatever morsel of food he was given, he licked his platter clean.

He could see that his actions, as well as his speech, had an effect on his guards. He was proving to himself that even in prison one human being could communicate effectively with another. That gave him confidence, and helped to tide him over the first four or five years of his imprisonment, when he was allowed no reading material except the People's Daily.

Every morning, Mr. Rittenberg recalled, he would wake up slowly — at first not quite conscious of his surroundings, then gradually hearing the early morning sounds of the prison, then opening his eyes and realizing, "I'm still in this place." It was always a crushing feeling.

That was when he would have to vigorously assert to himself, "I'm not under this stone. I'm not passive. I'm learning something, doing something, thinking about something. I'm going to live on, I'm not going to die." As he thus disciplined his thinking, he found that his entire prison experience was "not a subtraction from life, but an addition, not a black hole but part of my ongoing education."

And so, when release came after 10 long years, with an apology and full reinstatement, Mr. Rittenberg was alert and ready to go back to work, mentally and physically. He is now writing a book about his prison experience, as well as his 35 years in China. (To be published by Rawson, Wade Publishers, Inc.) He got the idea for the book last year when, on his first visit to the US in 34 years, he was asked by an American journalist how he had managed to come through the entire experience seemingly so unscathed.

"People are stronger than they think," he told his questioner. "If you got into a similar situation, you would probably find you could cope."

"If I was shut up like you for just 24 hours, I'd go mad," the answer came. Why? Because this journalist said, although he